Narrative on the Golden Altar of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan: Presentation and Reception

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The golden altar of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan is the liturgical focus and the spiritual center of the archiepiscopal city. It is also an extraordinary monument of early medieval art (Fig. 1). The narratives that adorn its front and back—stories of the lives of Christ and of Ambrose—are just two of the many features that secure the altar's power and prestige. Other features include the altar's precious materials, its consummate artistry, its status as the tomb of both the bishop Ambrose and martyrs, and its theatrical setting in the church, framed as it is by a ciborium, an apse mosaic, and an elevated floor with a crypt below (Figs. 2, 3).[1] Among these many potent elements, however, the story of the sainted bishop on his altar/tomb assumes a particularly important and active role in asserting the altar's prestige. It purposefully reaches out to the viewer, claiming both that the saint still "lives" and that sacred power is continued in the person of the archbishop of Milan, "quasi sanctus Ambrosius."[2] Indeed, by means of its hagiographic narrative, the golden altar effectively supports Milanese episcopal claims to primacy. Because pictorial hagiography can be such a powerful tool in the service of political interests,[3] this essay seeks to analyze precisely how Ambrose's story constructs its persuasive sacred and political rhetoric.

Although the use of narrative on the altar is highly significant, it is not the most striking visual element of the altar, nor is it unprecedented. There is evidence for early use of the saint's *vitae* on frontals at prominent "apostolic" sites, and some altars employed

[1] Although the present finished ciborium is of a later date, the altar always had a ciborium; C. Bertelli, "Mosaici a Milano," in *Atti del 10. Congresso internazionale di Studi sull'alto Medioevo, Milano, 26–30 settembre 1983* (Spoleto, 1986), 345.

[2] Lothar said as much of Angilbertus II; A. Ambrosioni, "Gli Arcivescovi nella vita di Milano," in *Atti del 10. Congresso internazionale* (as in note 1 above), 110. Bibliography on the effects and effectiveness of narratives, hagiographic and otherwise, is ample. See C. Hahn, "Picturing the Text: Narrative in the *Life* of the Saints," *Art History* 13 (1990): 1–32; and eadem, *Portrayed on the Heart* (forthcoming).

[3] B. Abou-el-Haj, *The Medieval Cult of Saints: Formations and Transformations* (Cambridge, 1994), 11–12. She implicates the altar in similar political maneuverings among Pavia, Venice, and Ravenna.

narratives of the life of Christ.[4] Nevertheless, the majority of altars were decorated with symbolic ornament alone. Such ornamentation served not only to beautify the altars to the "greater glory of God," but also to locate them in a context of reception that amplified their sanctity and significance.[5] The Milan altar is not lacking in conventional ornament; on the contrary, enameled bands, applied gems, and other beautiful and precious materials are present in abundance. Moreover, on the front of the altar, all narrative and figural material is clearly subordinate to the great jeweled, equal-armed cross at the center (Fig. 1). Notably, when the artist represented the altar *on* the altar, he found it sufficient to depict a box adorned with prominent bands in a generalized cross shape (Fig. 13).

The primary message of the altar is thus inarguably dogmatic and hierarchical.[6] It centers on the meaning and truth of the Passion of Christ as expressed in the Eucharist, on its implications for the church, and on its continuing significance as conveyed through the saints to whom most altars are dedicated.[7] Ambrose himself explicated the meaning of this altar/tomb when he wrote about the fourth-century original:

[4]Joseph Braun is the best source for a survey of altars and their ornamentation; see his *Der christliche Altar in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1924). Altars of precious metal were particularly characteristic of the Constantinian donations; *Liber Pontificalis* 1.34, trans. R. Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis): The Ancient Biographies of the First Ninety Roman Bishops to A.D. 715*, Translated Texts for Historians, Latin ser., 5 (Liverpool, 1989). Constantine gave seven silver altars to the Lateran (ibid., p. 16), and one to the basilica of Sts. Peter and Marcellinus (p. 23). Martyria did not generally have fixed altars, but over the graves of Peter and Paul Constantine placed precious metal crosses (pp. 18, 20), and in the crypt of Lawrence he placed the saint's "*passio* in medallions chased with silver" (p. 22). By the time of the Ambrose altar, however, there were, of course, altars in St. Peter's basilica. Beginning with Hadrian I, the 8th-century popes were generous with gold and silver at the altar of Peter's *confessio*; *The Lives of the Eighth-Century Popes (Liber Pontificalis): The Ancient Biographies of Nine Popes from A.D. 715 to A.D. 817*, trans. R. Davis, Translated Texts for Historians 13 (Liverpool, 1992), 97.83, 93: pp. 166, 170. Leo III even added a gold pavement (ibid., 98.51: p. 203). Following the sack of 846, Leo IV (847–855) found it appropriate to replace stolen liturgical treasures, including "imagines argenteas totasque exauratas" (*Liber Pontificalis*) at Peter's grave and, at the main altar, an altar frontal with gold and silver tablets, with subjects from the Old and New Testaments. See J. Croquison, "L'iconographie chrétienne à Rome d'après le *Liber Pontificalis*," *Byzantion* 34 (1964): 35–37, who notes a similarity to the Ambrose altar. Perhaps there might be said to have been a wave of precious altars or frontals produced in the Carolingian era. A lost example from Reims celebrated Nicaise, Remi, and the Virgin; it was decorated with precious metals and gems, and similarly celebrated "this seat," ca. 845(?)–862; G. Kornbluth, *Engraved Gems of the Carolingian Empire* (University Park, Pa., 1995), 121–22. Braun mentions other examples in Italy and France, including that, of course, of St. Denis given by Charles the Bald (*Altar*, 2:87–90). S. Bandera, "L'altare di Sant'Ambrogio: Indagine storico-artistica," in *L'altare d'oro di Sant'Ambrogio*, ed. C. Capponi (Milan, 1996), 79, cites a number of Carolingian altars and ciboria. (S. Bandera also wrote *L'altare d'oro di Sant'Ambrogio* [Milan, 1995], which I have not been able to consult.) Other than those at saints' shrines in Rome, the precious altars tend to be episcopal or imperial gifts and usually celebrate episcopal seats. (Although St. Denis is not the cathedral of Paris, Denis himself was the bishop.) Carolingians could have been following the lead either of altars in Rome or of lavish imperial donations made in the East, such as altars in Hagia Sophia and more than one at the Holy Sepulchre; Braun, *Altar*, 1:110, 116. It is interesting to note that by the 11th century the cathedral of Milan also had a golden altar; A. Ambrosioni, "L'altare e le due comunità santambrosiane," in *L'altare d'oro*, ed. Capponi (as above), 70 n. 13.

[5]E. Dahl, "Dilexi decorem domus Dei: Building to the Glory of God in the Middle Ages," *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 1 (1981): 157–90; and O. Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton, N.J., 1989).

[6]Some interesting recent works on medieval narrative in constructed and meaningful settings include R. Brilliant, "The Bayeux Tapestry: A Stripped Narrative for Their Eyes and Ears," *Word and Image* 7 (1991): 98–126; and M. Kupfer, *Romanesque Wall Painting in Central France: The Politics of Narrative* (New Haven, Conn., 1993).

[7]An interesting document to consider in a discussion of the typical ornamentation of altars is the Codex Calixtinus. Although it dates well after the Ambrose altar, it may be representative. It lists a number of altars,

> Let the triumphant victims [martyrs] take their place where Christ is the victim. Let Him be above the altar who suffered for all; let them be beneath the altar who were redeemed by His suffering. This is the spot that I had destined for myself because it is fitting that a bishop rest where he was wont to offer the Holy Sacrifice. But I yield the right-hand portion to the sacred victims, that place is owed the martyrs [Gervasius and Protasius].[8]

The same multilayered equivalence of Christ's sacrifice, martyr's sacrifice, and bishop's sacrifice expressed through hierarchical spatial organization clearly orders the ornamentation of the Milan altar.[9]

In contrast to the powerful but conventional significance of the altar, Ambrose's story offers the appeal of specific, complex, and discursive meanings. Amidst the dominant chords of symbol and ornament, pictorial narrative, as it were, plays a quiet but distinctive melody. Yet, in order to be heard, that melody must be carefully attended. The altar's reception depends on the abilities of its audience to discern the significance of the saint's story in relationship to its complex environment.[10] The altar makes a presentation, but any particular reading is only one of many that are possible—a momentary intersection among an infinite number of stories, histories, and symbols.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE ALTAR

The ninth-century reliquary-altar-tomb of St. Ambrose in Sant'Ambrogio is rare among early medieval altars in both its state of preservation and its relatively full documentation. We know something about the circumstances of its production: the altar was made by the artist Wolvinus at the behest of Bishop Angilbertus II (824–859). Furthermore, it has been investigated archaeologically and recently restored;[11] and its civic setting, Milan, has been the subject of much recent research.[12] The altar is often called a *paliotto*, but, rather than being an altar frontal, it is a complete altar enclosing the tomb of Ambrose, fabricated entirely of gold and silver, with added gems and enamels.

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most of which represent Christ, sometimes with the college of apostles; see J. Vielliard, *Le Guide du Pèlerin de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle* (Paris, 1984). See also the critical edition and translation, P. Gerson et al., eds., *A Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela: A Critical Edition* (London, 1998).

[8] Ambrose, *Epistola* 22.13: PL 16:1066; *Saint Ambrose: Letters*, trans. M. M. Beyenka (New York, 1954), 380, 381.

[9] Although at the time of the manufacture of the altar, and perhaps even earlier, Ambrose was tellingly shifted to the center, between and above the two martyrs; J.-C. Picard, *Le souvenir des évêques: Sépultures, listes épiscopales et culte des évêques en Italie du nord des origines au Xe siècle*, Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 268 (Rome, 1988), fig. 59.

[10] See C. Hahn, "Seeing and Believing: The Construction of Sanctity in Early Medieval Saints' Shrines," *Speculum* 72 (1997): 1079–106.

[11] Picard (*Souvenir*, 625 n. 158) cites F. M. Rossi, *Cronaca dei ristauri e delle scoperte fatte nell'insigne basilica di Sant'Ambrogio dall'anno 1857 al 1876* (Milan, 1884); L. Biraghi, *I tre sepolchri santambrosiani scoperti nel gennaio 1864* (Milan, 1864); and F. Reggiori, *La basilica di Sant'Ambrogio* (Milan, 1966), 101. The restoration of the altar in 1996 under the direction of Carlo Capponi is documented and celebrated with a full set of color photographs and a series of articles in *L'altare d'oro*, ed. Capponi.

[12] As well as research on the Christian tradition and geography of Milan. See Picard, *Souvenir;* F. Monfrin, "À propos de Milan chrétien: Siège épiscopal et topographie chrétienne, IVe–VIe siècle," *CahArch* 9 (1991): 7–46; C. Bertelli, ed., *Il Millennio Ambrosiano*, 3 vols. (Milan, 1987–88), esp. C. Bertelli, "Sant'Ambrogio da Angilberto II a Gotofredo," in ibid., 1:19 ff; V. H. Elbern, "Mailand–Spätantike Kaiserstadt," *Aachener Kunstblätter* 58 (1989–90): 11–30; and R. Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals: Topography and Politics* (Berkeley, Calif., 1982). Recently see also M. L. Gatti Perer, ed., *La basilica di S. Ambrogio: Il tempio ininterrotto* (Milan, 1995), with numerous articles summing up the state of research on the church.

The public side of the altar, facing the nave, proclaims the life of Christ, with particular focus on the Passion, in twelve framed narrative scenes in gold repoussé (Fig. 1).[13] On the other side of the altar, facing the liturgical celebrant (according to the Ambrosian rite),[14] the life of St. Ambrose is presented, in twelve framed scenes in partially gilded silver repoussé (Fig. 4). In his published dissertation on the altar, Viktor Elbern proposed that the two narratives functioned in typological opposition.[15] Although there is some general relationship of this kind between the front and the back of the altar, their scenes lack a one-to-one correspondence that is essential to typology. Instead, there are complex relationships among the scenes on the back, which collectively, and occasionally specifically, refer to the life of Christ on the front of the altar. Rather than establishing a set of typological links, the relationship works to locate the saint as part of the church, the institution founded on the Passion of Christ and realized in the celebration of the Mass. The life of Christ therefore provides a rhetorical "frame" within which the hagiographic narrative on the altar promises a continuing history of salvation, culminating in the guarantee of Ambrose's powerful intercession for his supplicants.

The specifics of the altar's layout are crucial to reading its narrative. In contrast to the scenes from the life of Christ, which read left to right in rising registers on the left side and begin again from the bottom on the right (Fig. 1), the scenes of Ambrose's life begin at the lower left and progress from left to right in each of the three horizontal registers—each register "jumping" across the space of a large central, non-narrative area—leading to a dénouement in the upper right (Fig. 4).

In a second difference between the back and the front, the less familiar narrative from the life of Ambrose includes an additional discursive level of labels, or *tituli*, which are not included in the scenes from the life of Christ. These labels both secure and direct the meaning of the story of Ambrose. Ten of the episodes are drawn from the fifth-century *vita* of Ambrose by Paulinus, as the wording of the *tituli* indicates;[16] the remaining two derive from a story in the *Libri de virtutibus sancti Martini episcopi* by Gregory of Tours.[17] Notably, Paulinus's *vita* and the episode from Gregory are also combined in a Carolingian *vita* of Ambrose, written shortly after the altar was made.[18] In general, this latter text matches the narrative on the altar less well than the earlier *vita*, but it can serve as a useful reflection of contemporary reception of the altar's story. As the discussion below shows, although each scene on the altar can be located in a textual source, the motives behind the selection of the specific scenes from Ambrose's *vitae* are to be found in con-

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[13]The scenes from the life of Christ include, on the left, the Annunciation, the Nativity, the presentation in the Temple, the miracle at Cana, Christ called by Jairus, and the Transfiguration; and on the right, the cleansing of the Temple, the healing of the blind man, the Crucifixion, the Pentecost, the Resurrection, and the Ascension. The last three are the Renaissance replacements of the Carolingian originals.

[14]V. Elbern, "Der Karolingische Goldschmiedekunst," in *Atti del 10. Congresso internazionale* (as in note 1 above), 302, cites E. Tea, *Arti minori nelle chiese di Milano* (Milan, 1950), 25, noting that the celebration of the mass "al ambrosiana" was "versus populum."

[15]V. Elbern, *Der Karolingische Goldaltar von Mailand* (Bonn, 1952), 23 ff.

[16]PL 14:65–114, trans. J. A. Lacy, "Life of St. Ambrose by Paulinus," in *Early Christian Biographies*, ed. R. J. Deferrari (New York, 1952), 27–66.

[17]*Libri de virtutibus sancti Martini episcopi*, ed. B. Krusch, MGH *ScriptRerMerov* (1885), 1:562–84; trans. R. Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, N.J., 1993), 207.

[18]A. Paredi, ed., *Vita e meriti di S. Ambrogio: Testo inedito del secolo nono illustrato con le miniature del Salterio di Arnolfo* (Milan, 1964). Ambrosioni dates the text to ca. 880 ("Arcivescovi," 112 n. 101).
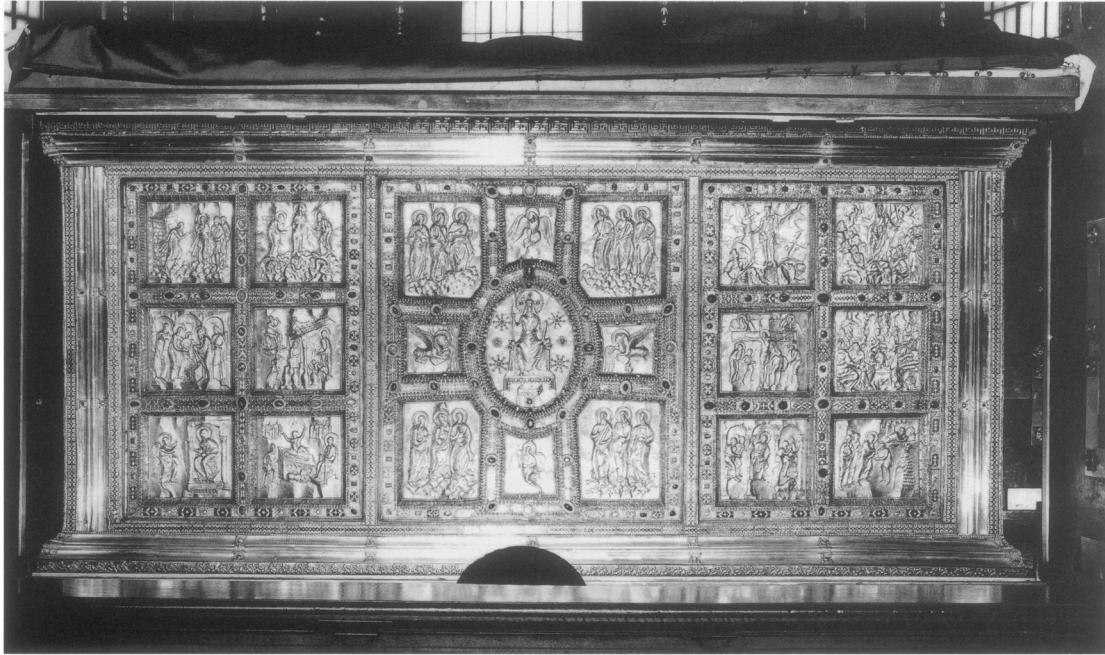
1   Christological narrative, view of the altar from the nave (photo: courtesy of the Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London)

2   View of the choir (after F. de Dartein, *Étude sur l'architecture lombarde et sur les origines de l'architecture romano-byzantine* [Paris, 1865–82], pl. 28)
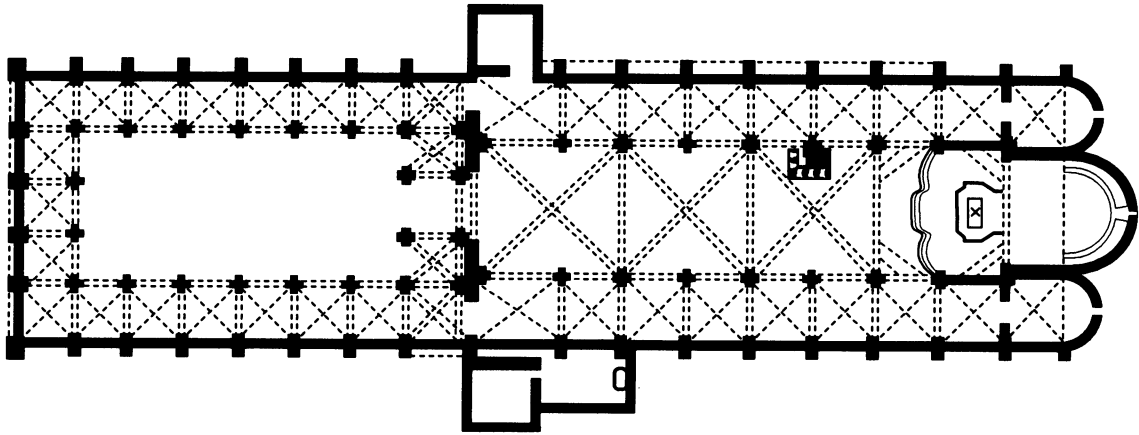
3 Floor plan (based on de Dartein, *Étude*)

4 Ambrose narrative, view of the altar from the choir (photo: courtesy of the Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London)

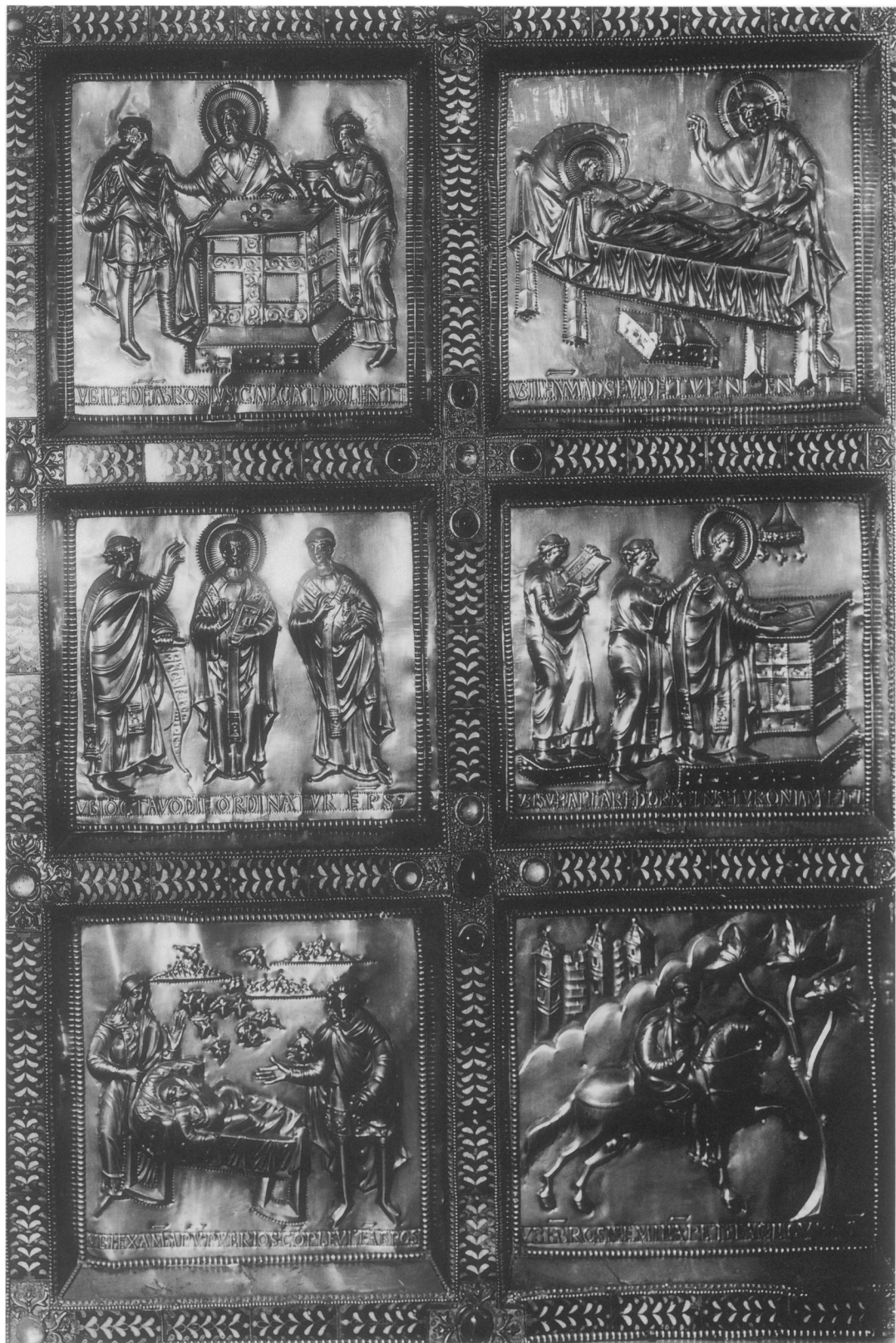5   Back of the altar, left portion (photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

6   Back of the altar, right portion (photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

7 Nativity, *Lectionary of Henry II,* Staatsbibl. Clm. 4452, fol. 9r, Munich (photo: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek)

8 Ambrose arriving in Milan (photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

9   Ambrose leaving Milan (photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

10   Ambrose baptized into the Orthodox faith (photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

11   Ambrose celebrates the funeral mass of St. Martin (photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

12   Ambrose preaches and converts an Arian (photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

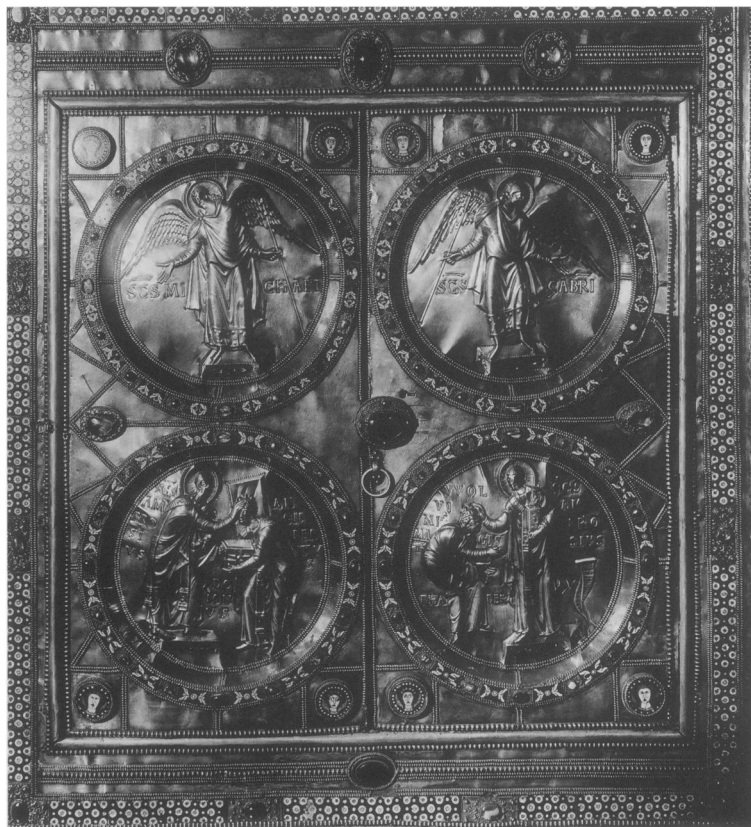13   Ambrose steps on Nicetius's foot and heals it miraculously (photo: Bildarchiv
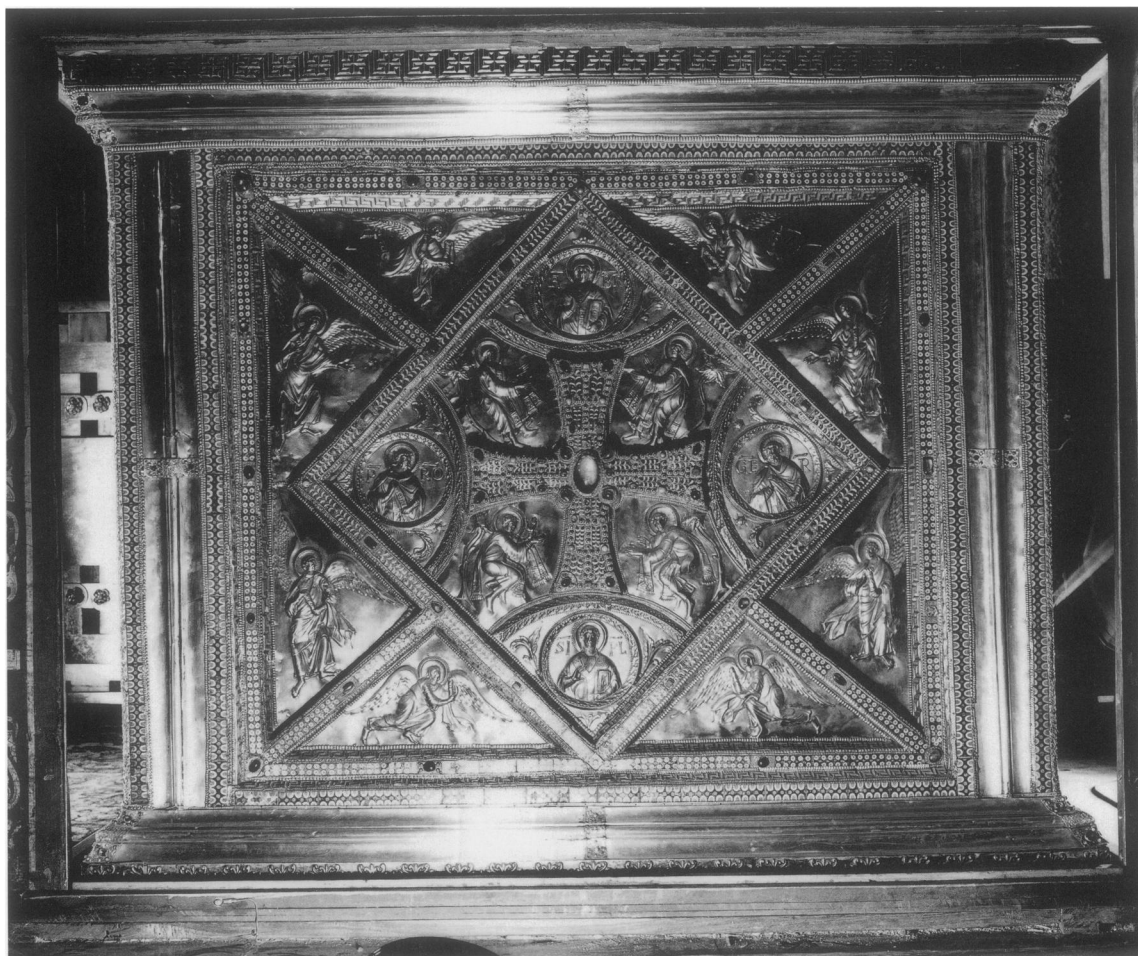Foto Marburg)

14   Ambrose's vision of Christ (photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

15 An angel speaks to Bishop Honoratus (photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

16 Back of the altar, central portion, *fenestella* (photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

17   Altar end (photo: courtesy of the Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London)

temporary events occurring in the archbishopric of Milan and efforts on the part of that institution to bring glory to the newly acknowledged "Ecclesia ambrosiana."[19]

The unusual choice of the scenes selected can be highlighted by contrasting them with the more typical emphases in other texts concerning Ambrose's life. A hymn to Ambrose by Ennodius from the early sixth century focuses on three groups of events from the saint's life: his Orthodox faith and his development of the cult of martyrs; his conflict with the empress Justina; and his role as a "shepherd" and theologian.[20] The later ninth-century Carolingian *vita,* mentioned above, similarly focuses on the cult of martyrs, politics, and theology, as does the Paulinus *vita,* if to a lesser degree. As parallels to these textual examples, any number of images of St. Ambrose depicted as a theologian might be cited, such as, for example, the author portrait from the eighth-century Egino Codex.[21]

Despite this clear pattern of hagiographic assessment of Ambrose as sainted theologian and able politician, almost no reference to these themes can be found on the golden altar, which clearly reconfigures the life of Ambrose in a new reading. There is no indication of conflict with heretics or secular authority, nor is there direct depiction of Ambrose as a theologian and writer. But even more surprising than these lacunae is the absence of any reference to Ambrose's involvement in the cult of martyrs, which, in Peter Brown's estimation, was an essential element of the saint's importance.[22] One should recall that, in addition to the body of Ambrose, this reliquary-altar-tomb also contains the relics of Gervasius and Protasius, the martyrs whom Ambrose discovered and translated to his basilica—yet they are barely acknowledged on the altar, appearing only on one end, in simple, tiny portrait roundels (Fig. 17).

THE NARRATIVE SCENES OF THE LIFE OF SAINT AMBROSE

What scenes from the saint's life *are* chosen for representation on the altar (Figs. 5, 6)? The first one seems to be a logical starting place. Ambrose is born; he is shown in his cradle (Fig. 5, lower left). Despite the apparent simplicity of this first scene, a number of important themes are introduced here. The label across the bottom of the panel reads, "In which a swarm of bees filled the mouth of the boy Ambrose."[23] The *titulus* is taken from Paulinus and identifies the first miracle of Ambrose's life: not only did the bees not harm the infant, they filled the baby's mouth with honey. This *topos* is generally used to foretell the honeyed words of the gifted orator—the same astounding story was told of the infants Pindar, Hesiod, and Plato[24]—but there is more here. The bees, as Paulinus tells us, afterwards ascended to heaven, above the clouds. The clouds in the altar scene are thus included in order to remind the viewer of the bees' celestial ascent.

[19] Picard, *Souvenir,* 628.

[20] Ibid., 614.

[21] P. Courcelle, *Recherches sur saint Ambroise: "Vies" anciennes, culture, iconographie* (Paris, 1973), 156, pl. II. This miniature is part of a book that was written for Egino of Verona, but decorated in a northern style related to the Ada school, providing an interesting comparison for the Milan altar with its northern ties.

[22] P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago, 1981).

[23] UBI EXAM(EN) APU(M) PUERI OS CO(M)PLEVIT A(M)BROSI(I). See G. B. Tatum, "The Paliotto of Sant' Ambrogio at Milan," *ArtB* 26 (1944): 29; Lacy, "Life of St. Ambrose," 3, p. 35: "well-ordered words are as a honey-comb" (Prov. 16:24.)

[24] Elbern, *Goldaltar,* 43.

The Carolingian *vita* further specifies that the bees came from God.[25] The insects are not a test of the infant saint, but his attribute: their honey is his by birthright, denoted by his very name, Ambrosius/*ambrosia*.[26] In congruence with his name, Ambrose's writings are repeatedly referred to in the Middle Ages as "nectar."[27] Instead of harming him, the insects of celestial origin mark a foreordained source of doctrinal sweetness, depositing the miraculous nectar as the infant's first taste of the divine and returning to heaven from whence they came.

The attentive viewer might also note the elaboration of the legs of the cradle. The same beading is repeated as a decorative motif throughout the reliefs, especially on holy objects such as church furniture.[28] Elbern compared the birth image to a scene of the Nativity of Christ, such as, for example, the one on the front of the altar. Even more tellingly, he also compared the Ambrose birth scene and the Nativity from the front of the altar to Ottonian manuscript images, such as that in the *Lectionary of Henry II*, in which Joseph and Mary present the Christ child while standing to either side of a crib that in the manuscript is clearly meant to double as an altar (Fig. 7).[29] If one understands Ambrose's parents as making the same gesture of presentation, the child Ambrose similarly becomes the sacrifice on the altar. Such a metaphorical consonance—Christ as sacrifice, and the saint in his stead—is typical in hagiography and essential to the meaning of the altar.[30] Indeed, the sacramental tone of the image explains the absence of the nurse of the Paulinus *vita,* who was said to have discovered the bees and wished to chase them away: she would become an unwelcome anecdotal distraction in the altar version.[31] Thus, already in this first scene, the themes of the altar have been introduced: it will present a discourse about the bishop's place in the church, especially his role as font of nourishing (and sweet) doctrine and his eventual sacrifice through his service.

The next two scenes, a pendant pair on either side of the central area, depict Ambrose on horseback, seemingly as two parts of the same journey (Figs. 8, 9). In fact, two different journeys are represented here. The first is Ambrose's departure from Rome as a young lawyer, as described by Paulinus (although, interestingly, the *titulus* specifies that he is *called,* "petit," to his new vocation).[32] The second is a much later episode concerning Ambrose's attempted escape from his episcopal duty in Milan. By this time the people of Milan had already acclaimed him bishop—an incident that was considered miraculous

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[25] Paredi, *Vita,* 5–6, p. 26.

[26] Elbern, *Goldaltar,* 43.

[27] Courcelle, *Recherches,* 132, esp. n. 2.

[28] Other examples of beading include the font in the fourth scene (baptism); the altar in the sixth scene (sleeping at the altar); the sarcophagus in the seventh scene (funeral of St. Martin); the altar in the ninth scene (foot healing); the beds in the tenth and eleventh scenes (visions of Ambrose and Honoratus); and the bed/altar in the twelfth scene (death of Ambrose), as well as objects and architecture on the opposite side of the altar.

[29] Elbern, *Goldaltar,* 43.

[30] See above, pp. 168–69, and also C. Hahn, *Passio Kiliani; Ps. Theotimus, Passio Margaretae; Orationes: Vollständige Faksimile-Ausgabe im Originalformat des Codex Ms. I 189 aus dem Besitz der Niedersächsischen Landesbibliothek Hannover* (Graz, 1988), 116.

[31] Although Pierre Courcelle argues that the artist left her out because she did not fit in the small space of the panel (*Recherches,* 172).

[32] UBI A(M)BROSI(U)S EMILIA(M) PETIT AC LIGURIA(M). See Tatum, "Paliotto," 29; Lacy, "Life of St. Ambrose," 5, pp. 35–36.

at the time of the creation of the altar,[33] since it meant that the people had recognized Ambrose's abilities and duty even before he was baptized. However, the miraculous recognition by the people is specifically *not* shown on the altar; in its stead, the saint, on horseback, is turned back by *God's* call. The *titulus* below reads, "In which, while fleeing, he is turned back by the breath of the Holy Spirit," a detail missing from Paulinus.[34] The episode is reminiscent of the calling of Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus, perhaps thus implicating an apostolic reference.[35] Indeed, Paulinus notes that at this point in the life of Ambrose God who "was preparing . . . a tower of David against the face of Damascus . . . checked his flight."[36]

In typical hagiographic fashion, Ambrose's many sins (even feigned lechery), which are detailed in the fifth-century narrative of Paulinus (but only vaguely alluded to in the Carolingian *vita*), are represented here symbolically.[37] Thus, Ambrose's willful character is conveyed solely through a depiction of his proud stallion with its enormous genitalia. Furthermore, by means of this horse Ambrose is characterized as a noble, a status that implicated pride and unchecked power.[38] In turning to God's call in the scene parallel to but reversed in direction from the previous, more civic scene, Ambrose is specifically shown to give up his elevated secular status: he uses the reins and the prominently pictured stirrups to turn the horse forcibly and accept God's will.

In the next scene, Ambrose is baptized (Fig. 10).[39] Following Carlo Romussi, Elbern argued that the image conformed to the early Milanese practice of combining immersion with infusion.[40] With the baptism as the final scene on the lower register, the depiction of Ambrose's secular life is concluded. In this last moment, by virtue of the ceremony of baptism, not only is Ambrose reborn to a new life as a Christian, but, humble and nude, he also visibly renounces the accoutrements of status and power of his past. Both Paulinus and the Carolingian hagiographer are careful to note that the bishop who performed the baptism was Orthodox.[41]

On the next register, Ambrose assumes a new garb, that of liturgical vestments. The *titulus* of the first scene specifies that "on the eighth day he is ordained bishop."[42] In the relief, the saint is acclaimed and ordained by his fellow bishops (Fig. 5, middle left). For the first time a halo marks his sanctity. Notably, Paulinus's *vita* reads very differently than

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[33] Courcelle, *Recherches,* 126.

[34] UBI FUGIENS SP(IRIT)U S(AN)C(T)O FLANTE REVERTITUR. See Tatum, "Paliotto," 29. One possible reason for the pairing of the two scenes is that the Carolingian *vita* notes that Ambrose is also "called" to his secular life; see Paredi, *Vita,* 5–6, p. 26.

[35] L. Eleen, "Acts Illustration in Italy and Byzantium," *DOP* 31 (1977): 255–80.

[36] Lacy, "Life of St. Ambrose," 7–8, p. 37.

[37] Ibid.; Paredi, *Vita,* 10–14, pp. 31–36.

[38] A horse often signifies the vice *superbia:* J. Traeger, "Pferd," in *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie* (Rome, 1971), 3:413; although most examples date later than the altar.

[39] The *titulus* reads, UBI CATHOLICO BAPTIZATUR EP(ISCOP)O. See Tatum, "Paliotto," 30; Lacy, "Life of St. Ambrose," 9, p. 38.

[40] Elbern suggests that the image combines two formulae for the baptism of Christ; *Goldaltar,* 45–46. He cites C. Romussi, *Milano nei suoi monumenti* (Milan, 1912), 1:14. For the baptismal rite in Milan, see E. Cattaneo, "Storia e particolarità del rito ambrosiano," in *Storia di Milano* (Milan, 1954), 3:831.

[41] Lacy, "Life of St. Ambrose," 9, p. 38; Paredi, *Vita,* 11, p. 34.

[42] UBI OCTAVO DIE ORDINATUR EP(ISCOPU)S. See Tatum, "Paliotto," 30; Lacy, "Life of St. Ambrose," 9, p. 38.

does the sequence of events implied by these last three reliefs. In the fifth-century *vita,* the people spontaneously acclaimed Ambrose, recognizing him as the politic solution to the strife in the city caused by dissension between the Arians and the Orthodox. Liturgical ordination is not mentioned at all. In contrast, in the Carolingian *vita,* the process of the bishop's election is initiated by the emperor but left to the bishops, who, the emperor insists, will make a better choice. In the process, a public meeting is held, but in place of the spontaneous acclamation by the people, a single "celestial" voice is heard to nominate Ambrose to office.[43]

Not surprisingly, the relief is more liturgically and institutionally oriented than the fifth-century *vita.* As does the ninth-century account, the image emphasizes Ambrose's reception by and place among other clergy, especially other bishops, initiating the liturgical theme that dominates the second register. It is significant that the Carolingian *vita* emphasizes the emperor's recognition of the dignity and independence of episcopal election, which is essentially what is depicted here, *especially in the absence* of the emperor.[44] The celestial recognition of Ambrose's fitness for the episcopal state, marked by miraculous events in each version of the *vita,* is represented on the altar first by the hand of God that points Ambrose to his calling and then by the halo that shows the fulfillment of the divine plan.[45]

The next two scenes (Fig. 5, middle right; Fig. 11) are again linked across the central panel, as were the equestrian scenes directly below. In this episode taken from the *Libri de virtutibus sancti Martini episcopi,* Ambrose's brotherhood with St. Martin is demonstrated as well as his importance in the community of bishops. While celebrating a mass, just before the reading of the Epistle (the lector on the left is poised, ready to read), Ambrose fell asleep. The people and the clergy waited patiently for two or three hours, but finally moved to wake the bishop. Upon awakening, Ambrose explained that the great Bishop Martin had died and that he (Ambrose) had gone to Tours and helped to celebrate the funeral.[46] The *titulus* of the first scene reads, "In which as he sleeps at the altar he visits Tours"[47]; and that of the second relief continues, "In which he buried the body of the blessed Martin."[48] In the scenes on the altar, Ambrose is much more active than simply chanting the Psalms, as he does in Gregory's text: here he actually handles the shroud and the holy haloed head, as the *titulus* implies. As noted above, the Carolingian *vita* includes this scene, although the author seems to be uncertain about its chronology and squeezes it in at the end.[49] On the altar, the depiction of this extraordinary episode as two scenes that are placed in the very center of a narrative limited to twelve scenes signals its importance.

[43] See note 45.

[44] This is reminiscent of an incident that occurred between Bishop Angilbertus II and Lothar. In refusing to bow to the emperor, Angilbertus claimed a special status based on the honor of his church. Lothar admitted that he was "quasi sanctus Ambrosius." See Ambrosioni, "Arcivescovi," 110.

[45] Similarly, in the Fulda manuscript of his *vita,* Kilian of Würzburg is first shown with a halo only when he assumes a liturgical role; Hahn, *Passio Kiliani,* 50. Barbara Abou-el-Haj discusses episcopal ordination in somewhat later cases, citing the Ambrose image as an example, in "Consecration and Investiture in the Life of Saint Amand, Valenciennes Bibl. Mun. Ms. 502," *ArtB* 61 (1979): 342–58.

[46] Van Dam, *Saints,* 207.

[47] UBI SU(PE)R ALTARE DORMIENS TURONIAM (P)ETIT. See Tatum, "Paliotto," 30.

[48] UBI SEPELVIT CORPUS BEATI MARTINI. See ibid.

[49] As well he should, since Ambrose died before Martin and could not possibly have attended his funeral.

Remarkably, the subject was also chosen for the ninth- or tenth-century mosaics that are included in the apse of the church (Fig. 2, just above the windows, left and right).[50] In those mosaics Ambrose assumes an even more prominent role in the funeral ceremonies, seemingly leading the liturgical celebration of the funeral.[51] The appearance of the person of Bishop Martin in these narratives seems puzzling at first, but a number of explanations come to the fore.

In the ninth (and also the tenth) century, Martin was the premier saint of Carolingian France, a status that would have been recognized by the Frankish patron of the altar, Angilbertus.[52] Martin was known in Italy as the "hammer of heretics" and was thus a spiritual brother to Ambrose, who was known as a scourge of the Arians.[53] The close accord of the Frankish Martin and the Milanese patron may in some sense also reflect a desire of the two populations of Milan—Frankish overlords and Milanese citizens—to reach a similar accord.[54]

Ultimately, however, this scene may have been included in order to call attention to Ambrose's status as equal to the Frankish bishop and therefore as part of a sort of spiritual brotherhood of sainted bishops.[55] Contemporary to the altar, numerous other bishops' shrines were constructed throughout the empire at monasteries practicing *laus perennis*, creating a series of foci of intercessory prayer for the empire and its citizens, and especially for its clergy. Exchanges among these monasteries, formalized as confraternities of prayer, dealt in the valuable commodity of saintly patronage through the medium of liturgical commemoration.[56]

Sant'Ambrogio was an important part of this network of prayer. In the eighth century, Frankish monks had been brought to Milan to found a monastery at Sant'Ambrogio that specialized in the *laus perennis* and the accompanying prayer for the dead.[57] The monks

[50] Carlo Bertelli dates these mosaics to the 9th century, although many scholars would have them date to the 10th. He connects the pseudo-Greek of the inscriptions with similar 9th-century Graecisms, and also notes a Byzantine use of color. I would think that the mosaics represent the completion of the program of the apse and the choir, and postdate the altar. Cf. Bertelli, "Mosaici a Milano," 333–51; also see bibliography in Courcelle, *Recherches*, 180–82; and summary in C. Bertelli, "Percorso tra le testimonianze figurative più antiche: Dai mosaici di S. Vittore in Ciel d'oro al pulpito della basilica," in *S. Ambrogio*, ed. Gatti Perer, 364.

[51] Surprisingly, the mosaic episodes are in reverse order in comparison to the story as it appears on the altar. This cannot be the result of a mistake, as has been suggested, but must be purposeful. In fact, the episode of Ambrose at the altar does not take place solely before the Touronian episode, but acts as a frame— Ambrose is awakened and explains where he has been after the event. The present arrangement in the mosaics does result in the final episode occurring in Milan, with the effect that, perhaps, Milan is seen as heir to the saintly spirit of the great Bishop Martin.

[52] Angilbertus II was Frankish and the patron of other Frankish ecclesiastics; Picard, *Souvenir*, 242, 625. Sandrina Bandera ("L'altare," 84–91) even links the altar to the Carolingian image controversy and Touronian manuscripts.

[53] O. von Simson, *Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna* (Chicago, 1948), 83, 138. Martin is even cited in the litanies as an enemy of heresy; Bandera ("L'altare," 74) prefers this explanation.

[54] Annamaria Ambrosioni ("Arcivescovi," 106) speaks of the inclusion of the Martin episode in the Carolingian *vita* of Ambrose.

[55] Imagery in the *vita* recalls the saint's status among the "stars"; Paredi, *Vita*, 4, p. 24. This is a *topos* in saints' *vitae*. It occurs in the epigrams at St. Martin at Tours; see Van Dam, *Saints*, 312.

[56] These were shrines such as those of Germanus or St. Denis. See M. McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints: Prayer for the Dead in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), 88–89; and the essays in K. Schmid and J. Wollasch, eds., *Memoria: Der geschichtliche Zeugniswert des liturgischen Gedenkens im Mittelalter* (Munich, 1984).

[57] McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints*, 60–67 and passim.

were specifically to pray for the king, his people, the church of Milan, and the founder of the monastery (the archbishop Peter).[58] Specific evidence of a confraternity survives from the ninth century. Angilbertus himself, for example, wrote to Fulda, asking to be included in the monk's prayers at the shrine of Bonifatius and promising prayers in return.[59] Perhaps, in the scenes on the altar St. Ambrose is pictured as initiating such a commemoration and spiritual confraternity with the monastery of St. Martin. This narrative of brotherhood thus serves to tie Milan to the empire while at the same time emphasizing a certain independence and spiritual prestige.

The second register of the altar is completed with a deceptively simple preaching scene (Fig. 12): Ambrose, on the left, speaks to a group of three standing listeners. The image surprises the viewer by its lack of an ecclesiastical context. No architecture or church furniture is present, as they are in so many of the other reliefs; and, although the Carolingian *vita* did emphasize Ambrose's role as a teacher, especially of the clergy,[60] this audience is lay. Elsewhere I have argued that this scene and others like it in the *vitae* of missionaries are based on the images from apostolic Lives originating in Early Christian Rome, specifically known to us from the walls of St. Peter's and St. Paul's basilicas.[61] These images were still extant in the time of the ninth-century Milanese viewers and may therefore have been familiar to some of them. If so, Ambrose's preaching is not merely simple but takes on apostolic simplicity.

One other remarkable aspect of the image, of course, is that a seemingly fleshly angel stands behind the saint, leaning heavily upon the saint's back and whispering intimately into his ear. Ambrose seems almost not to react, but, as the *titulus* specifies, he serenely "preaches with the words of an angel,"[62] a point on which both Paulinus and the Carolingian *vita* are in agreement.[63] This angelic inspiration of the saint's speech and the miracle of the visible angel are to be differentiated from Ambrose's native eloquence as demonstrated in the initial scene of the bees, in that the angelic words indicate divine inspiration. In keeping with the liturgical emphasis of the whole second register, Ambrose is liturgically garbed, despite the lack of a formal setting.

The final and topmost register begins with what must be considered a eucharistic miracle (Fig. 13). Nicetius, a man of the tribune class, approached the altar to receive the sacraments and was trodden upon by the celebrant Ambrose.[64] The inadvertent trampling cured the man's crippled feet. This episode is not an important feature in the text of Paulinus, and does not occur at all in the Carolingian *vita*. Wolvinus's depiction of the scene "in which Ambrose treads on the foot of a sick man," as it is labeled by the *titulus*,[65] perhaps explains the saint's clumsiness as a result of his focused attention on the Eucharist. The sacred elements are prominent upon the altar; Elbern notes that the carefully

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[58] Ambrosioni, "Arcivescovi," 108.

[59] E. Cattaneo, "La tradizione e il rito ambrosiani nell'ambiente lombardo-medioevale," in *La Chiesa di Ambrogio: Studi di storia e di liturgia* (Milan, 1984), 13 n. 25, citing MGH *Ep*, 5:532. Bandera cites other, more general connections with Fulda ("L'altare," 94).

[60] Paredi, *Vita*, 16, p. 38.

[61] Hahn, *Passio Kiliani*, 75.

[62] UBI PREDICAT A(N)G(E)LO LOQ(UE)NTE A(M)BROSIU(S). See Tatum, "Paliotto," 30.

[63] Paulinus specifies that the sight of the angel converted an Arian; Lacy, "Life of St. Ambrose," 17, p. 43. In the Carolingian *vita*, the angel is also visible and whispers "celestial doctrine"; Paredi, *Vita*, 90, p. 144.

[64] Lacy, "Life of St. Ambrose," 44, p. 60.

[65] UBI PEDE(M) A(M)BROSIUS CALCAT DOLENTI. See Tatum, "Paliotto," 30.

depicted four-part *fractio panis* follows the Ambrosian rite.[66] Furthermore, the altar in the relief conspicuously matches the altar represented in Angilbertus's dedication image (see Fig. 16). It appears that the glorious nature of the Eucharist, celebrated at the famous altar according to the revered Ambrosian rite, is the true subject of the image. If so, in this miracle, which is the only one in the narrative focusing on the miraculous cause and effect, the altar itself may be part of the cause.[67]

The Carolingian *vita* dwells at length on another episode concerning a layman's approach to the altar. In that story, the emperor Theodosius approached the Milan altar, as was his custom at Hagia Sophia. Ambrose reprimanded the emperor, saying that his place was outside the *cancelli;* in Milan only priests were allowed to approach the altar.[68] Is it a coincidence that in the relief a priest approaches the altar from the right, while Nicetius seems almost to get a gentle reprimand from Ambrose along with the cure of his foot?[69]

The remainder of the topmost register concerns Ambrose's death and celestial ascent. The fact that it begins with the celebration of the Eucharist, which is presented as the most sacred of the events, seems fitting. It ends also with an altar and the sacrifice of the Mass. The two scenes in between are, once more, constructed as paired pendants framing the central opening (Figs. 14, 15).[70] They represent Ambrose's vision of Christ at his deathbed, and Bishop Honoratus of Vercelli's vision of an angel telling him of Ambrose's impending death. The scenes are reversed but alike, down to the representation of the shoes left at the side of the bed. Indeed, these shoes are often noted as a charming detail. They may, however, have greater significance. Given that the details of saints' *vitae* were invariably charged with meaning rather than whimsy, that the pontifical *sandalia* were a mark of sanctity of the celebrant and often emphasized in images,[71] that Ambrose had just performed a miracle with his foot, and that in both cases the footwear was "displayed" on a jeweled footstool like that in the fourth scene of the baptism or that behind the altar in the sixth scene, one must conclude that these shoes are purposefully represented. I would suggest that they stand for the active and liturgically embedded life of the bishop, that is, a life that is quintessentially repetitive and shared. They are a mark of the earthly episcopal *office,* put aside while each bishop as an individual receives a heavenly vision.[72]

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[66] Elbern, *Goldaltar,* 50. For the Ambrosian rite, see Cattaneo, "Storia e particolarità," 811.

[67] This miracle, with the saint's inattention to the cure, might be compared to a miracle from the life of Christ, namely, the healing of the woman with the issue of blood. In that miracle, Christ felt the touch that effected the cure, but did not consciously will the miracle.

[68] Paredi, *Vita,* 58, p. 98.

[69] Paulinus writes that the man testified to the secretive cure after Ambrose's death. He heard the saint say, "Go, and be well"; Lacy, "Life of St. Ambrose," 44, p. 60.

[70] The *tituli* read, UBI IE(S)UM AD SE VIDET VENIENTE(M); and UBI AM(M)ONIT(US) HONORA-T(US) EP(ISCOPU)S D(OMI)NI OFFER(T) COR(PUS). See Tatum, "Paliotto," 30.

[71] Elsewhere the altar simply depicts generalized footwear, but some manuscripts show slipperlike shoes similar to those on the footstools. See, for example, the portrait of Ambrose in the Egino Codex cited above, note 21. See also J. Braun, *Die liturgische Gewandung im Occident und Orient* (Darmstadt, 1964), 393–98. Although Braun discusses shoes that show elaborate straps, more like sandals than the slippers of the Ambrose altar, his evidence shows that the episcopal shoe type was considered a privilege and was at times granted to abbots (p. 398).

[72] A similar sort of theology of office that separates the person from the office is explicated by Ernst Kantorowicz. In particular, the feet of the king are said to be on earth while the head is in heaven; see idem, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, N.J., 1957), 71.

In Ambrose's case, the saint receives the vision as a sort of dialogue with Christ: his eyes are open, and he gestures with his hands. This is emphatically unlike the typical saint's vision. For example, in the *vita* of St. Adalbert, represented on the doors at Gniezno in Poland, the saint dreams; his eyes are closed, and he is passive.[73] In another variant, in Honoratus's case on the altar, the sleeping bishop looks stunned, almost flattened by an angelic revelation. Furthermore, in other instances on the altar, the artist represents the conveyance of divine messages yet in two more ways—once picturing an angel whispering in the saint's ear, and once diverging from textual sources to use the symbolic image of the hand of God. All of these various possibilities for the representation of the delivery and reception of divine messages are familiar but nonetheless imbued with meaning. An angelic messenger and a dream vision are quite comparable, although dreams may give more leeway for the interpretation of the message.[74] Alternately, the hand of God represents something more immediately divine than do either of the first two possibilities, at the same time being quite abstract; it may more often represent hearing God rather than seeing him.

In contrast to such symbolic visions, dreams, and disembodied or angelic voices, Ambrose's vision of Christ represents direct contact with the divine. Christ is depicted as physically present, actually standing at the side of the bed. Paulinus even notes that he was "smiling."[75] Venetian hagiography concerning Mark's comparable vision of Christ pointedly presents such a bodily vision and dialogue as equivalent to the apostolic experience of Christ in the flesh.[76] But, in the end, Ambrose's open-eyed revelation is best understood as a *visio Dei,* usually reserved until after death except in the case of the holiest of saints.[77]

Finally, in the last scene (Fig. 6, upper right), Ambrose's soul is carried to heaven by an angel, "anima in celum ducitur," a detail which Elbern compares to the Ambrosian liturgy for the dead.[78] The scene leaves no doubt that the bishop now resides in heaven—he is welcomed by the hand of God. The *titulus* concludes, in the last words of the altar narrative, that the body remained behind, "corpore in lecto posito."[79] Once again, as in the scene of his infancy, Ambrose's bed is, in effect, designated as an altarlike site of offering, this time draped with lavish fabrics, and the celebrating bishop Honoratus is dressed in the pallium.

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[73] Abou-el-Haj, *Medieval Cult,* 30, 43, 46–48, fig. 52.

[74] S. F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1992).

[75] Lacy, "Life of St. Ambrose," 47, p. 61. For the Honoratus episode, see ibid., 47, p. 62.

[76] T. A. Dale, "Inventing a Sacred Past: Pictorial Narratives of St. Mark the Evangelist in Aquileia and Venice, ca. 1000–1300," *DOP* 48 (1994): 65–66.

[77] Paschasius Radbertus wrote, "If souls still clinging to bodily chains, as if bound tight in a prison of limbs, can in the still of the night perceive higher things and things separated from their appearances, how much more do they see who are free from all earthly corruptions, for as one of the saints said, they see with a sense both pure and ethereal." *Epitaphium Arsenii* 1.5, ed. E. Dümmler, *Philologische und historische Abhandlungen der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (1900), 2:27; cited in P. E. Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1994), 43. Also see C. Hahn, "*Visio Dei:* Changes in Medieval Visuality," to appear in *Visuality before and beyond the Renaissance,* ed. R. Nelson (Cambridge, in press).

[78] Elbern, *Goldaltar,* 53.

[79] UBI ANIMA IN CELUM DUCITUR CORPORE IN LECTO POSITO, translated as "In which his soul is borne up to heaven, his body remaining on the bier"; Tatum, "Paliotto," 30. See also Lacy, "Life of St. Ambrose," 47, p. 62.

Remarkably, a relic bed of St. Ambrose of similar shape still exists in Milan, although it was not deposited at Sant'Ambrogio. Although it was not documented before 1598, its construction and design have been suggested to be consistent with fourth- or perhaps ninth-century manufacture.[80] Such a relic bed would have gained prestige through its use as a means of display for the body, and it may be specifically referred to in the *titulus*.

Although Bishop Honoratus seems to be witnessing the miracle of the ascension of Ambrose's soul, in the previous scene he was commanded by the angel to offer the sacrament, the *corpus Domini*, as viaticum. The recurrence of the word *corpus* in the two *tituli* emphasizes the parallel between the saint's body and that of Christ. It also implicates the sacrifice of Ambrose's body and the bishop's continuing earthly service as the very foundation of the altar.

To summarize, a number of striking aspects of the construction and presentation of the Ambrose narrative on the Milan altar have been noted. First, the hagiographic narrative faces the celebrant and the choir, while the more public side is occupied with scenes from the life of Christ. Secondly, an altar, or altarlike element, is included in at least four of the scenes, as well as in the dedication scene in the center (Angilbertus II with the altar, Fig. 16), and four other scenes include additional liturgical elements or actions. Only the two linked horseback scenes of Ambrose's calling and the two linked vision scenes (to which I return below) can be excluded from the specific realm of liturgical celebrations, actual or implied. Clearly, the bishop's life is depicted on the altar as fully and intrinsically fashioned by the requirements of the liturgy, in this case specifically the Ambrosian liturgy.

Finally, and perhaps most intriguing, a series of three pairs of scenes have been identified, each of which connects to its pendant across the central area of the altar. The three pairs are the only such linked scenes in the narrative (excepting perhaps the link of the angelic summons of Honoratus with the funeral scene), and yet their connection is left to be established by the viewer across a chasm that is equal to a third of the altar's width. The viewer nevertheless makes the association, because in each case the connection is not a simple link, but is doubly forged. The link is firmly established both by means of the artistic devices of repetition, reversal, and composition, and by the narrative device of significant causal connection. Furthermore, rather than logical or historical cause and effect, it is divine causality—either a miracle or divine summons—that makes the link between each pair. Thus, the disruption of the narrative continuity that might seem intrusive or even aggressive performs a positive function instead, decisively locating divine power and establishing a sacred center for the narrative and the altar.

THE DOORS AS THE "GATES OF JUSTICE"

Remarkably, the central third of the altar's back has no literal center (Fig. 16). In contrast to the front of the altar, which finds its focus in Christ and the cross (Fig. 1), the middle of the back is marked by a void, or, rather, the thin line created by the meeting

[80]The relic was located in the Capella di San Vittore in Ciel d'Oro; F. Reggiori, *La "lettiera di Sant'Ambrogio,"* in A. de Capitani d'Arzago, *Antichi tessuti della Basilica Ambrosiana*, Biblioteca de l'arte 1 (Milan, 1941), 107–16. Also see E. Cattaneo, "La devozione a Sant'Ambrogio," *Archivio ambrosiano* 27 (1974): 85–110. Bandera ("L'altare," 78) also notes the existence of the bed.

of the two doors of a very large and elaborate *fenestella*. Rather than being an image or a place, the sacred center thus consists of space and movement—space for the devotion to the saint, and movement of the soul toward God through the intervention of the saint. Both of these are clearly articulated in the visual construction of the doors.

The space beckons the pious body. The functioning doors of the *fenestella* open to an area large enough for the insertion of a good part of a supplicant's body into the saint's *confessio*, as was the case at famous tombs, notably that of St. Peter.[81] Within the altar the devotee would have encountered the saint's porphyry sarcophagus, a reused imperial object positioned over the graves of the martyrs.[82]

The movement that represents the spiritual salvation of the soul through Ambrose's patronage is the culmination of the narrative and the subject of the imagery on the doors. In the past, attention has been focused on the relatively static images of the portrait of the patron Angilbertus II (824–859), the bishop of Milan, and the self-portrait of Wolvinus, *magist(er) phaber*, the artist. Angilbertus wears a square halo, indicating a living subject of the portrait.[83] Each figure is also crowned by Ambrose and, along with the saint, is encircled by a jeweled wreath. Although these two tondi are the major foci for the imagery (Fig. 16), circling the artist and the bishop are a "host" of angels. Eight are represented in enamel button-like clipea; and in their own tondi above, two large figures of the archangels Michael and Gabriel point with staves to the line created by the juncture of the doors and seemingly gesture with welcome, one to the left and the other to the right.[84] Twelve gems are inset into the enamel band that frames the doors, and a large emerald is placed just to the right of the center.

Surely, these elaborate doors are meant to represent the "Gates of Justice" (Ps. 118:19) and the entry to Paradise, opened to Christians because of the sacrifice of the Mass and accessible especially through the intercession of the saints. At Santa Prassede in Rome, on the triumphal arch of the 820s, a similar iconography of angels who lead souls to welcoming saints in the Heavenly Jerusalem is based on the funerary antiphon *In paradisum*.[85] Elbern argued that Angilbertus would have seen Santa Prassede when he had attended the coronation of Louis II in Rome in 844 and that the apse mosaics of

[81] Elbern (*Goldaltar*, 20–21) draws a parallel with Gregory of Tours' description of Peter's tomb with its *fenestella*, through which Gregory inserted his head. The 8th-century version of Peter's tomb also had doors; see Y. Christes and K. Möseneder, "Fenestella," *Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte* 7 (1981): 1227–53, esp. 1228; also see references to the *Liber Pontificalis* in note 4.

[82] I describe the 9th-century configuration. In the present configuration of the altar, one would encounter a space and a floor slab with holes through which one has limited access to the sarcophagus; see G. Righetto, "Scavi ottocenteschi in S. Ambrogio: La basilica ambrosiana in età paleocristiana e alto medioevale nella 'Cronaca dei restauri' di Mons. Rossi," in *S. Ambrogio*, ed. Gatti Perer, 145 and fig. 18; Picard, *Souvenir*, 626.

[83] Tatum ("Paliotto," 27–28) argues that the recipient of such a halo could be dead, but he is countered by Elbern, *Goldaltar*, 57. For a more recent discussion of such haloes, see H. Belting, "Eine Privatkapelle im frühmittelalterlichen Rom," *DOP* 41 (1987): 55–69.

[84] Elbern (*Goldaltar*, 56) calls them "welcoming." I would say they are also indicating the holy nature of the interior of the *confessio*.

[85] The antiphon is a response to Psalm 118; see M. Mauck, "The Mosaic of the Triumphal Arch of S. Prassede: A Liturgical Interpretation," *Speculum* 62 (1987): 814, 824. For the Ambrosian funeral rite, see Cattaneo, "Storia e particolarità," 837. The altar as a whole has been referred to as the Celestial Jerusalem by G. Ravasi, "Iconografia Biblica dell'altare d'oro," in *L'altare d'oro*, ed. Capponi (as in note 4 above), 43. The inscription on the altar has been compared to the apse inscription at Santa Prassede and that at S. Cecilia; see M. Ferrari, "Le iscrizioni," in ibid., 150.

Sant'Ambrogio had been inspired by the apse of that church.[86] This particular argument is problematic considering the disagreements over the dating of the mosaics; yet the possible relationship between the iconography of the altar and the triumphal arch of Santa Prassede might be much more specific. It is not, however, a relationship of copying: the saints that welcome souls at Santa Prassede are martyrs, not a bishop as on the doors of the altar. In fact, rather than offering a close parallel to the altar's doors, the funerary and intercessory iconography of Santa Prassede corresponds more precisely to the language of the funeral antiphons as well as to the imagery of the two, nearly identical, ends of the Milanese altar.

It appears that intercessory iconography on the ends of the altar is integrated with an abbreviated imagery of the Milanese episcopal list.[87] On each end, two bishops and two martyrs are represented in repoussé roundels. Ambrose is paired with Simplicianus, his sainted successor, and with Gervasius and Protasius, the two martyrs whom he buried under the altar (Fig. 17). On the opposite end are Bishop Martin, once more (above), and Maternus, who, according to ninth-century belief, was the first bishop of Milan.[88] The two martyrs represented here, Nabor and Nazarius, were also "invented" by Ambrose.

In fact, the three Milanese bishops who are singled out for representation on the altar ends appear in Carolingian Milanese missals among the *Communicantes*, the saintly community that is remembered during the intercessory prayers at the outset of the Mass,[89] while Martin, as above, may represent confraternal intercessory prayer. Each end of the altar also includes eight angels and four unexplained vested or togate figures praying toward central images of a jeweled cross. Elbern notes that the Ambrosian liturgical preface specifies eight angel choirs, as did certain Carolingian litanies.[90] It has also been suggested that the rotulae that the majority of the angels carry represent the "book of life" of Revelation 20:12.[91] I would suggest that the standing figures are meant to be saints as citizens of heaven praying in intercession as part of the funeral liturgy, as at Santa Prassede. Thus, the ends of the altar correspond more precisely to the liturgy of intercession than do the doors.

The imagery on the doors must then be seen as a variation on the established intercessory iconography and a refocusing on the possibilities of episcopal intercession. Martyrs are replaced by the bishop Ambrose, and, in a further transgression of norms, Ambrose himself crowns Angilbertus and Wolvinus as he receives their efforts on his

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[86] Elbern, "Mailand-Spätantike," 19.

[87] Episcopal lists often represent a first step in claiming privileges such as patriarchal or metropolitan status for an archiepiscopacy; see Picard, *Souvenir*, 689–700. Some of these lists are visual (505–520), and a number of the visual lists take the form of altar cloths (515–518).

[88] At Tours, many of the bishops were buried in St. Martin's, which was *not* the cathedral, just as the bishops' burial place in Milan; see S. Farmer, *Communities of Saint Martin* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), 22. One other similarity has been noted between Martin and Ambrose, namely, the recurrence of the *topos* of the bishop sent to the sick bed of another bishop. In Martin's *vita*, Martin was sent to the bed of Bishop Liborius; Elbern, *Goldaltar*, 52.

[89] Picard, *Souvenir*, 624; J. A. Jungmann, *Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*, trans. F. A. Brunner (1949; repr. Westminster, Md., 1986), 2:170–79.

[90] Elbern, *Goldaltar*, 61.

[91] Gianfranco Ravasi ("Iconografia," 54) identifies the vested figures as deacons, and possibly the four deacons of Ambrose.

behalf. Byzantinists are familiar with such crownings occurring in imperial images of a later date,[92] and saints are often depicted as similarly crowned by Christ when they enter heaven;[93] but this crowning of a living archbishop and his artisan by a saint instead of Christ is unprecedented and quite startling. It can only be understood in terms of the expanded use to which the altar was put and the tremendous prestige of Ambrose's cult.

The cult seems to center on these doors. One must ask, however, how often the doors were actually opened and for whom. The fact that their opening was considered "a great event in the life of the basilica"[94] indicates that they were opened only rarely. Appropriate occasions seem to have included important feast days and the first mass of a new *sacerdos*, or guardian, of the church. As a result of his special privilege, the new guardian must have been able to experience the mass he celebrated with special poignancy, "sacrificing himself on the altar" in memory of Ambrose and the martyrs, just as Ambrose had done himself, according to the Carolingian *vita*.[95] In turn, he became the intimate recipient of the grace of salvation that the altar promised.

In contrast, other aspects of the doors' use seem more ceremonial, and the ceremonies would have had one particular audience—the clergy. The very act of the opening of the doors seems to have been celebrated as solemn liturgy by the *cimiliarchia*, the guardian who had been entrusted with the keys in a special ceremony called *tollite claves*.[96] Once the doors were open, because of their position and the arrangement of the altar in the choir space, the best visual access to the interior of the *confessio* would have been enjoyed by the archbishop. His ninth-century stone *sedia* is positioned directly behind the altar, in line with the doors.[97]

Whether or not the altar's doors were actually opened to supplicants, they were represented as the very nexus of a system of prayer through and with the saints, which was sponsored by the clergy. The inscription on the back face of the shrine begins, "The beneficent ark [reliquary] shines forth, lovely with its glittering panoply of metal and dressed with gems. But more potent than all its gold is the treasure with which it is endowed by virtue of the holy bones within it . . ." The inscription then names the patron Angilbertus and asks for the divine blessing upon the bishop who gave it while serving "this brilliant see."[98] Ambrose is invoked as the treasure and center of this holy archbish-

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[92] I. Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, "Eudokia Makrembolitissa and the Romanus Ivory," *DOP* 31 (1977): 305–28; there the emperor and the empress are standing on footstools in the same sort of undefined space. On the Ambrose altar, only Ambrose (and the angels above him) stands on a footstool. Elsewhere the footstool may be liturgical (in scenes 4, 7, and possibly 10 and 11), but in the center it seems quite specifically to indicate a heavenly location.

[93] Hahn, *Passio Kiliani*, 100–103. Elbern (*Goldaltar*, 57) also notes the unusual nature of crowning.

[94] E. Mazza, "La liturgia nella basilica di S. Ambrogio in epoca medioevale," in *S. Ambrogio*, 304.

[95] Paredi, *Vita*, 86, p. 140. This *topos* also occurs in Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*, in *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1940), xvi, 213, and is similar to the phrasing in Augustine, *Civitas Dei* 20.19. For the *sacerdotes*, see Mazza, "Liturgia," 304.

[96] On the other hand, the abbots of the monastery had to fight for their right to have the doors opened; see Mazza, "Liturgia," 304, 307. Surely the "key liturgy" was reminiscent of the handing of the keys to Peter—represented on the 10th-century ciborium above the altar—and also argued for the likeness of the doors to the Gates of Justice.

[97] *S. Ambrogio*, ed. Gatti Perer, 67, fig. 76. The inscription reads, PRESUL MAGNIFICUS RESIDENS IN SEDE DECORUS/+SITU ROMANA VERO QUAE SEDE SECUNDA.

[98]   Æmicat alma foris rutiloque decore venust(a)
        Arca metallorum gemmis quae compta corusca(t)
        Thesauro tamen haec cuncto potiore metall(o)

opric; and the imagery on the doors makes clear that he is able to guarantee his intercessory power.

A document purported to have been written by Angilbertus gave the monks control of the altar and later became the center of a controversy between the monks and the guardians/canons of the cathedral.[99] Although the controversy extended from the eleventh to the eighteenth century, its roots were founded in jealousies between the monks and the guardians of the basilica that had existed from the time of the altar's creation.[100] The altar had become the focus of a sacred necropolis: the majority of the bishops of Milan were buried in close proximity to it, rather than in the cathedral.[101] The controversy is testimony to the power of the altar and its function as the very center of Milanese intercessory and commemorative prayer.

As images of the liturgical functioning of saintly intercession, the back and the ends of the altar hold out a promise to any Christian that prayer to the saints, and specifically prayer to Ambrose, will advance them toward salvation. Nevertheless, as noted above, one portion of the audience is especially privileged and would presumably move most swiftly along the path toward salvation (or work as mediators for others). The imagery confirms this privileged position of the clergy and especially the bishop. Not only is Ambrose defined as a bishop by his participation in the liturgy, but he is also carefully placed within a succession and a community of bishops—being baptized by an Orthodox bishop and ordained by two bishops, serving to bury Bishop Martin, naming his successor on his deathbed (according to one *vita*),[102] and being buried in turn by Honoratus of Vercelli, one of Milan's suffragan bishops.[103] Finally, the saintly bishop's promotion to the place of the welcoming martyrs in the structure of intercessory iconography holds promise of remarkable powers residing in his hands.

THE ALTAR'S POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SETTING

It is not surprising that such an altar should have been commissioned by Archbishop Angilbertus II. The episcopacy of Milan enjoyed unprecedented ecclesiastical *and* secular

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Ossibus interius pollet donata sacrati(s).
(Æ)gregius quod praesul opus sub honore beat(i)
Inclitus Ambrosii templo recubantis in isto
Optulit Angilbertus ovans, Dominoque dicavi(t)
Tempore quo nitidae servabat culmina sedis.
(A)spice, summe pater, famulo miserere benign(o),
(T)e miserante Deus donum sublime reporte(t).

Letters in parentheses occur at corners and are used in two words, one written horizontally and one vertically. See Tatum, "Paliotto," 26. Tatum translates the rest as follows: "This work the noble bishop, famed Angilbert, offered with joy in honor of the blessed Ambrose who lies in this temple and dedicated to the Lord in the time when he held the chief place of this brilliant see. Father on high [i.e., Ambrose], look upon and pity thy loving servant, by thy intercession may God bestow his divine blessing."

[99]The document's authenticity has been challenged. See Tatum, "Paliotto," 26–27; Abou-el-Haj, *Medieval Cult*, 11–12.

[100]A. Ambrosioni, "Monaci e canonici all'ombra delle due torri," in *S. Ambrogio*, ed. Gatti Perer, 244–46. The guardians were reformed as canons in the 11th century.

[101]Picard, *Souvenir*, 358, 624. See also A. Rovetta, "Memorie e monumenti funerari in S. Ambrogio tra Medioevo e Rinascimento," in *S. Ambrogio*, ed. Gatti Perer, 269–93.

[102]Paulinus does not mention this episode, but the Carolingian *vita* does; see Paredi, *Vita*, 82, p. 132.

[103]The bishop of Vercelli was a suffragan of Milan at least by the time of the altar's manufacture; see Picard, *Souvenir*, 627 n. 165.

power under the Carolingians. Angilbertus II is known for his close "adhesion to the program of Carolingian reforms" and his acceptance of the "universalist ideal of empire."[104] Nevertheless, he was a strong leader for Milan as an important city in its own right. He reformed the Ambrosian liturgy of the cathedral,[105] was intimately involved in judicial matters, and apparently used his moral authority to eradicate superstition and "evil." He founded hospitals and monasteries, brought in trans-Alpine monks, and supported the poor.[106] He also seems to have initiated a rebuilding of the apse of Sant'-Ambrogio, constructing a typically Carolingian crypt.[107]

I have already noted that the altar is literally surrounded by the bodies of the former bishops of Milan (this pattern of episcopal burial near a saintly bishop, albeit not in the local cathedral, was increasingly popular at this time; cf. Tours, Auxerre, Ravenna/Classe, and, of course, Rome).[108] However, it is also significant that, in the apse above the altar, the suffragan bishops of Milan were painted above their episcopal seats (Fig. 2).[109] The seated bishops visually commemorated Milan's episcopal prestige.[110] During the episcopacy of Angilbertus II, the number of Milan's suffragans had risen from four to seven, and then to an all-time high of eleven, later possibly reduced to nine. Moreover, the depiction of this chorus of suffragans in Sant'Ambrogio rather than in the cathedral once more confirms Ambrose's premier importance for Milan. He is the center, perhaps even the source, of an episcopal network that extends in both space and time, including his suffragans as well as his successors and his brothers throughout the empire. As his ninth-century hagiographer wrote, "All that this Milanese church owns in merit and grace, it owes to the magisterium of Ambrose."[111] At that time he was even said to be the author of the Ambrosian liturgy, an assertion contrary to fact, but which thereby credited him with one of the great glories of Milan.[112]

Indeed, the altar must have even been intended in part as confirmation and visualization of the prestige of the Milanese liturgy. Although hagiographic texts and the imagery of the altar allow no doubt about Ambrose's status—and through him the status and

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[104]Ambrosioni, "Arcivescovi," 99.

[105]Ambrosioni, "L'altare," 58; also Bandera, "L'altare," 78.

[106]Ambrosioni, "Arcivescovi," 102–6; Bandera, "L'altare," 106.

[107]Although the body remained directly under the altar rather than being buried in the crypt below; see Ambrosioni, "L'altare," 58. Also see Hahn, "Seeing and Believing," 1101–6.

[108]See notes 88 and 107.

[109]There were eighteen bishops with inscriptions, which were in poor shape already in the 19th century. F. de Dartein cannot ascertain a date but gives inscriptions and labels, in *Étude sur l'architecture lombarde et sur les origines de l'architecture romano-byzantine* (Paris, 1865–82), 86–88. Bandera ("L'altare," 75–78) believes that the presence of the bishop of Coira among the suffragans helps to date the rebuilding of the apse and thus the construction of the altar, since the bishop of Coira ceased to be a suffragan of Milan between 842 and 847. She also compares this iconography to that of Saint-Germain at Auxerre, which is comparable in other ways as well (cf. above, p. 175 and note 56).

[110]These represent the bishops who accompanied the archbishop (or the metropolitan in 850) to various councils; see Ambrosioni, "Arcivescovi," 104. There seem to have been eighteen suffragans represented in the apse, each with a synodal decree beneath; see Bandera, "L'altare," 103, citing C. Ferrarrio, *Monumenti sacri e profani della basilica di Sant'Ambrogio* (Milan, 1824), 159.

[111]Courcelle, *Recherches*, 121; Picard (*Souvenir,* 630) notes that this quote derives from a sermon on Eusebius of Vercelli and marks a beginning of Ambrose as city patron.

[112]The 8th-century *Versum de Mediolano civitate* (a text important for its celebration of Milan's episcopacy) cites the liturgy as one of the glories of Milan; see Picard, *Souvenir,* 628 n. 167. Picard (ibid., 697) shows that other cities developed similar cults around their founding bishops and martyrs; nonetheless, Milan is confident in its prestigious saint and bishop.

position of the Milanese episcopacy—apparently the Milanese liturgy was briefly chal-
lenged earlier under the Carolingians. A ninth-century miracle story recounted by Paul
the Deacon and an eleventh-century one reported by Landulfus Senior both express a
need to defend the validity of the Ambrosian rite; the latter even explicitly defends it
against the liturgical standardizations of Charlemagne.[113] The matter seems, however, to
have been resolved by the time Walafrid Strabo wrote ca. 840 (that is, approximately
contemporary with the altar), "Ambrose, bishop of Milan, determined the organization
of the mass as well as the other offices for his church and the other churches of Liguria,
an organization that is still respected today in the Church of Milan."[114]

Moreover, the altar does not only claim equality with other altars and their liturgies—
it claims superiority. It does so, as noted in its inscription, through its very materials and
form; the altar is made entirely of precious metals, enamels, and gems. Although many
tombs and altars were ornamented with such riches, few were entirely gold and/or silver.
Those that were singled out in medieval sources as being so constructed stood among
the most famous shrines and altars of Christendom. Furthermore, for the most part they
were located in three major centers renowned for liturgy, namely, Rome, Constantinople,
and Jerusalem: in Rome, examples are recorded by the *Liber Pontificalis*, including partic-
ularly the altar in St. Peter's; in Constantinople, both the Constantinian and Justinianic
Hagia Sophia had lavish golden altars; and in Jerusalem, more than one golden altar
was recorded in the Holy Sepulchre.[115] Indeed, gold even has celestial resonance, for in
Revelation 8:3 an angel offers "the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar."

Just as the precious materials resonated with apostolic, liturgical, and heavenly sig-
nificance, so large *fenestellae* were characteristic of apostolic altars, particularly those in
Rome.[116] Other references to Rome might also be found in the burial patterns of the
bishops, in the inscription on the contemporary episcopal throne in Sant'Ambrogio,
which claims a comparison to Rome, and, as argued by Carlo Bertelli, in the later stucco
ornament of the ciborium, which depicts Ambrose and his clergy as comparable to Peter
and Paul.[117]

Finally, as we have seen, there are apostolic parallels between the imagery of the altar
and the texts of Ambrose's *vitae*. On the altar, Ambrose is likened to Paul in the scene of
his calling, preaches with apostolic simplicity, and witnesses Christ in apostolic fashion,
"in his body." The Carolingian *vita* in particular is filled with comparisons of Ambrose to
the apostles, especially Peter.[118] Elsewhere in Italy, for example, in Venice, Aquileia, and

[113] Picard, *Souvenir*, 628–29.

[114] Ibid., 629: *Libellus de exordiis et incrementis quarumdam observationibus ecclesiasticis rerum*, 23; MGH *Capit*, 2:497.

[115] See note 4. Braun also discusses the *confessio* ornamentation; see *Altar*, 1:563 ff.

[116] See note 81. Throughout the *Liber Pontificalis*, it is noted that popes renewed the gold or silver on *confessio* doors of various saints. Also see Elbern, *Goldaltar*, 20; and idem, "Karolingische Goldschmiede-kunst," 302.

[117] See note 97 for the inscription on the episcopal throne. Bertelli argues that the stuccoes make the claim that Milan is equal to Rome and that Ambrose was chosen like Peter and Paul; see his "Il ciborio restaurato," in *Il ciborio della basilica di Sant'Ambrogio in Milano* (Milan, 1981), 37, 59. Ambrose and his clergy face the clerical side or choir, while Peter and Paul face the nave. I have not been able to consult A. Columbo, "Milano 'secunda Roma' e la lapide encomiastica dell'antica Porta Romana," *AStLomb* 83 (1956): 149–52.

[118] Paredi, *Vita*, 16, p. 38: Ambrose built the church like the apostle on the rock of Christ; ibid., 43, p. 76: Ambrose wrote in his own hand at night like Paul; ibid., 76, p. 124: like the apostle, Ambrose wanted to be liberated from his body; ibid., 86, p. 138: Ambrose had apostolic virtues.

Ravenna, apostolic prestige was sought for archiepiscopal sees, and even claims to the dignity of the patriarchate were made through the use of texts and images.[119] The altar in Milan does not so much claim apostolicity for the saint as it asserts Ambrose's status as fully equal to the greatest of saints.

Thus, in sum, the ornament and the setting of the altar in Sant'Ambrogio construct a sanctity of enormous power and prestige: Ambrose is depicted as a leader of bishops among bishops, the equal to any saint, and the very font and origin of sanctity in Milan. It is therefore not surprising that the altar narrative foregoes a historical and anecdotal Ambrose in favor of the depiction of a patron fully able to guarantee access to salvation— to crown his supplicants from the city of Milan as citizens of heaven.

OTHER STORIES

At the outset of this essay, I argued that a narrative could tell many stories. The historical context and the audience of Ambrose's life seem to determine the altar's story as a single story written for a specific clerical audience. Clerics certainly were the primary patrons and audience of the altar; however, narratives always allow other stories, and hagiographies, being the stories of individuals, always allow for a more private and intimate perception. In my opinion, at least one pathway of the narrative, unrelated to the highroad posted with the signs of episcopal and ecclesiastical power, is accessible and should be explored here. It leads more directly to concerns about the reliquary status of the altar as a tomb, which is a question of great interest to me. Perhaps it begins to trace the way in which reliquaries may operate in providing access to the divine and succoring the individual.

This pathway is a path of the senses. In the lowest register, the first miracle emphasized the mouth of the baby Ambrose. Although I concentrated earlier on the meaning of the miracle for the church, one could also read it as a miracle of taste—the baby Ambrose was given his first intimation of the Lord through a sweetness in his mouth. Likewise, in the scenes of baptism and ordination, Ambrose experienced contact with the divine through liturgical touch. In the last scene of the second register, Ambrose heard the words of the Lord as an angel whispered in his ear. Finally, in the center of the uppermost register, Ambrose is granted a vision of God before death. The selection of miracles and their depiction describe an unmistakable hierarchy of the senses in approaching the knowledge of God.[120] The focus on the body of the saint is central to hagiography and to the meaning of tombs. As Peter the Venerable taught in a sermon concerning relics, "And he teaches us to know from his body, and he shows by his own body what you ought to hope for yours."[121] The narrative recommends an ascent toward

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[119] Dale, "Inventing a Sacred Past," esp. 103.

[120] Sight is always at the apex of a system of the senses. Augustine used the image of the Five Wise Virgins as a model for the proper use and refinement of the senses. See C. Hahn, "Icon and Narrative in the Berlin Life of St. Lucy (Kupferstichkabinett MS78A4)," in *The Sacred Image East and West*, ed. R. Ousterhout and L. Brubaker (Urbana, Ill., 1995), 72–90. The five senses were explicitly represented in art as early as the 9th century; see C. Nordenfalk, "Les cinq sens dans l'art du moyen âge," *Revue de l'art* 34 (1976): 17–28.

[121] "Sermo cuius supra in honore sancti illius cuius reliquiae sunt in presenti," in "Petri Venerabilis sermones tres," ed. G. Constable, *Revue bénédictine* 64 (1954): 271; cited and trans. in C. Solt, "Romanesque French Reliquaries," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 9 (1987): 181.

God through the senses, and it feeds directly into the ascent promised through the saint's advocacy as discussed above.

Perhaps the viewer can hope, like Ambrose, to know God. It may be that one is invited by the *fenestella* to approach and come into contact with the holy body through touch, but above I expressed scepticism about how often and for whom the doors would have been opened. Rather than touch, taste, or even hear the sacred, the supplicant is invited by the imagery of the altar to seek the *sight* of the holy as the highest experience of the divine. The altar does so through its narrative, and also, of course, through its very existence, "lovely with its glittering panoply of metal and . . . gems."[122]

However, even were this message legible, it must have been rather faint for the laity. Just as today, so also in the medieval period the altar was difficult to approach—witness the miracle of the foot-trampling in the upper left corner. Whose altar is this? Maybe it is that of the monks, maybe that of the guardians, but it is certainly not a place for the average Christian. Even the nobility were to keep their distance from this holy altar; perhaps, as in the Carolingian *vita*, the emperor himself was enjoined not to approach.

Ultimately, the altar of Ambrose wields powerful weapons of holy rhetoric—it calls upon the life of Christ, the power of the liturgy, the significance of its materials, the persuasions of space, the representation of prayer, the power of words, and even the witness of the senses. Its discourse is almost overwhelming in its complexity and power, a battering ram of holiness, if you will. Clearly, the original intention was to reserve the intercessory power of the saint's body and of the narrative for the service of the church, specifically the church as an institution located in Milan. Nevertheless, narratives resist control, and some of the power of Ambrose's story spills out and is able even to touch the viewer of today.

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[122]The quote comes from the altar's inscription (see note 98).